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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the Investigating Transfer Project, which provides an authentic reflection of students' transfer experiences in British Columbia. The majority of interviewees in Phase 1 of the project, who had transferred from community college to university, reported that they commenced their studies at a community college with the intention to transfer to a university. For some, difficulties occurred in trying to work out an acceptable schedule that satisfied the necessary transfer requirements, determining whether the information was current, and trying to understand what the information meant. Overall, however, most students satisfactorily transferred most or all of their credits. The decline in grade point average (GPA) after transfer was the most significant issue, the one that consistently caused students the most anxiety. Phase 2 offers insight into the perceptions of students who had not yet transferred from community college. Most students in this study appeared to employ a very unfocussed approach to transfer. Student participants in Phase 1 and Phase 2 offered three similar recommendations to improve transfer policies and practices: development of a user friendly Transfer Handbook for Students; written explanation from the receiving institution for each course that was not fully transferable; and mandatory advising for all students intending to transfer. (JA)

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Research Report

JULY 1999

BRITISH COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON ADMISSIONS & TRANSFER

Investigating Transfer: The Student's Perspective

by Lesley Andres

Centre for Policy Studies in Higher Education and Training, University of British Columbia

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Research Report

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BRITISH COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON ADMISSIONS & TRANSFER

Investigating Transfer: The Student's Perspective

by Lesley Andres

Centre for Policy Studies in Higher Education and Training, University of British Columbia

The British Columbia post-secondary system provides students with many opportunities for transfer. This diversity of offerings may also present challenges for students who try to navigate their way through the system. As part of a larger endeavour to understand issues of transfer, the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) commissioned the *Investigating Transfer Project*.[1] Because this project features actual quotes from students, thus providing an authentic reflection of their transfer experiences, it is unique amongst other Council research projects. This report summarizes the first two phases of this project.

Phase I: University Students' Perceptions of Their Transfer Experience

Through interviews with 47 students who had transferred from community college to university, the purpose of *Phase I* was to: 1) determine the nature of transfer; 2) portray experiences surrounding the transfer process; 3) document difficulties and successes encountered before, during, and after transfer; and 4) highlight advantages and disadvantages of transfer.

The majority of interviewees reported that they commenced their studies at a community college with the intention to transfer to university. Most students knew exactly what program they wanted to enter from the beginning; a few others had changed their minds along the way.

Respondents gave a number of reasons for starting their studies at a community college rather than entering university directly. They often described college as a "stepping stone" to university, a way of easing out of high school before hitting the rigours of university life. Some students referred to the financial incentive of lower tuition rates. Others said that since community college was reputed to be easier, it was a good way to embark on a post-secondary career with better chances of earning a higher GPA. For some, entering university directly from high school was not an option because their secondary school grades were not high enough. One student explained:

> *I could not get into university. So after high school the only way, the alternative path to get into university for me, is to study [at] college. Rather than retaking grade 12 courses to get high grades.*

For students who spoke English as a second language, community college was a way to get started on their post-secondary education until they passed the TOEFL.

Because most of the respondents intended to transfer, they indicated that they were usually attentive to the question of transferability, and were careful to take courses that they knew were transferable. Some students described this process as quite straightforward, simply a matter of reading the college calendar, and adhering to what the available information indicated was transferable and what was not. Hence, it was "a smooth sort of process." Others said that it was complicated and confusing. Difficulties occurred in three key areas: trying to work out an acceptable schedule that satisfied the necessary transfer requirements; determining whether the information

OF ALL THE ISSUES associated with transfer, the decline in GPA after transfer was the most significant and the one that consistently caused students the most anxiety.

1 The *Phase I* (Andres, Qayyum & Dawson, 1997), *Phase II* (Andres, 1998), and *Phase III* (Andres & Dawson, 1998) reports are available on the publications menu of the BCCAT web site: www.bccat.bc.ca

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was current; and trying to understand what the information meant.

As the following comments illustrate, some students said that talking to academic advisors at the college was helpful; others said it was a waste of time, or that the advice was wrong or untrustworthy:

> *Everyone was helpful at community college and university. . . . They pretty much answered all my questions.*

> *The [college] counsellors didn't know very much . . . . They would go, "well you should go up to [the university] and ask." Every time I came up here it's like nobody would pay attention to you.*

STUDENTS

often described college as a "stepping stone" to university, a way of easing out of high school before hitting the rigours of university life.

Overall, despite the different levels of complication identified concerning getting the necessary transfer information from various sources, most students satisfactorily transferred most or all of their credits. If they had taken courses for which transfer credit was not a possibility, they typically knew it at the time.

For the majority of interviewees, the mechanics of the transfer process did not present an overwhelming source of distress. Yet, some students identified problems that from their perspective involved mistakes – or at least miscuing – on the part of one or the other of the institutions, which students claimed resulted in:

- difficulty making sense of the information available to them
- lack of clarity about the required procedures, practices, and policies
- confusion about "assigned" vs. "unassigned" credits in some situations
- confusion about their status upon acceptance into university (i.e., general acceptance vs. acceptance into a program).

Of all the issues associated with transfer, the decline in GPA after transfer was the most significant and the one that consistently caused students the most anxiety. Only five of the 47 students interviewed reported an increase in grades following their transfer to university. These students claimed their grades went up because they were more interested in the course material and were responding positively to more challenging academic environment. A few students claimed that their grades had stayed about the same. However, by far the majority of respondents reported that their GPA had gone down at university. These students also found the move from college to university difficult and stressful, sometimes to the point where they felt they had encountered a serious setback in achieving their academic goals. A few students reported being on "academic probation" because their grades had dropped to a level of marginal acceptability. Three factors – increased academic rigour, the grading system (in particular employment of the bell curve system), and larger classes – were most frequently implicated as being responsible for declining grades.[2]

The interview respondents presented a number of different interpretations of the difference between college and university and what accounted for the decline in grades that they experienced.

Interviewees described university as:

- big, confusing, cold, impersonal
- a place where it was hard to make friends and to penetrate the prevailing "nobody cares" attitude
- a more difficult and challenging learning environment
- demanding much more independent work and initiative.

Conversely, community college was described as:

- smaller, friendlier, and more supportive
- a place where instructors were more approachable and accessible
- an environment where it was easier to speak out in class, providing more opportunities for discussion and clarification.

However, some students claimed that college was too much like high school, that there was too much "spoon feeding," and that because it was easier to know what was going to be on an exam, one could memorize just enough to get by and then forget it. Although some students claimed that the greater challenge associated with university caused them to learn more, others said that they learned less because they did not have the opportunity for discussion, and because the university climate was one that promoted "grade thirst" at the expense of "knowledge hunger."

Did students indicate that the preferred route to university was through community college? Most interviewees responded with an enthusiastic "Yes!" Despite the annoyances related to the transfer process and a declining grade point average after transfer, community college was described as having provided solid preparation that eased the transition to university. This ease of transition was reported most often as the major advantage of transfer.

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2 Other Council sponsored studies indicate that both students who enter university directly from high school and students who transfer to university from community college, experience declines in GPA. Over time, however, students' GPAs gradually recover. See Student Profile studies listed on the publications menu, www.bccat.bc.ca

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If I had first graduated and come here [to university], I would have been really overwhelmed by it. . . . My high school was quite small and . . . . I would have been lost.

Only a handful of students would have preferred to complete the requirements for their degree in the small, intimate climate afforded by the community college. A few others felt that they should have delayed transfer to university. A small group claimed there was little difference between the two institutions.

The key disadvantages specified involved adapting to two different institutions and the extra demands placed on transfer students that were not expected of students who commenced their studies at university. These demands included being aware of the transfer process, enrolling in courses that were transferable, and spending considerable amounts of time on processes and procedures related to transfer.

You have to spend time in those courses which are transferable. But for the university students they don't have to spend time thinking about that, about those courses that can transfer to other institutions.

Phase I provides an in depth analysis of the perspectives of a sample of students, all of whom had transferred successfully from community college to university. Phase II offers insights into the perceptions of students who had not yet transferred from community college.

Phase II: Community College Students Contemplate Transfer

In *Phase II* of this project, 18 first year community college students were followed over time to determine: 1) their transfer intentions; 2) steps taken to transfer; and 3) experiences related to the transfer process. In addition, a focus group was conducted with another group of 19 community college students. This phase of the project provided an in depth qualitative account of students' perceptions of the transfer process as anticipated and experienced.

Despite the relatively small number of participants involved in this study, there was considerable diversity in student backgrounds. High school students arrived at the community college with little knowledge about the system in general. Students from other countries – in this study Syria and Iran – had "official" transcripts that were largely incompatible with our system. Mothers were required to plan their college experience around their families. Older students entering from the work force confronted a system that was foreign to them.

Discussions with respondents about "intent to transfer" suggest that this notion is multifaceted. A few individuals entered community college with the intent to transfer to a specific institution. For others, plans to transfer materialized midstream. And, for a few students, the intent to transfer was present, but vague. Although all students volunteered to participate in the interviews based on their intent to transfer, "intent" clearly involved many dimensions, including: 1) intent in the broadest sense of the word; 2) choice of a receiving institution; 3) choice of program at the receiving institution; 4) intended date of transfer.

MOST STUDENTS

in this study appeared to employ a very unfocussed, unsystematic – and in a few cases, almost indifferent – approach to transfer.

Resources available to facilitate the transfer experience – including the calendar, the BCCAT Transfer Guide, counsellors and advisors – were underutilized by these students. Students reported that they were unaware of the existence of some resources, unable to understand some of the written materials, or both. Advice provided by counsellors and advisors was described in many ways, including "great" "helpful" "confusing" and "frustrating." Regardless of the opinions expressed, students indicated that they preferred the assistance of a human being rather than being required to rely on written documentation.

Most students in this study appeared to employ a very unfocussed, unsystematic – and in a few cases, almost indifferent – approach to transfer. As one student remarked,

I really haven't done a lot about transferring. I just decided over last summer what I really wanted to go into.

Students relied on word of mouth, primarily from other students and family members. The calendar was the most frequently used printed source of material. However, it contained information that was described as "confusing" and "frustrating." Only four students reported having used the *B.C. Transfer Guide* and described it as "easy to read and really helpful too" and "pretty self explanatory." However, others responded "The what?" and "I have no clue what that even is."

Despite complaints about the lack of resources and confusing advice, students did not appear particularly perplexed. There was a general sentiment that everything would work out in the end. It was not uncommon to hear comments such as

I've basically investigated it on my own.

I don't even know if you have to apply [to transfer].

UVic . . . will know what is going on.

Follow-up interviews four months later revealed that since the initial interviews, most students remained unfocussed in their approach to transfer.

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WHAT STUDENTS RECOMMENDED:

Phase I	*Phase II*
1. Development of a user friendly Transfer Handbook for Students.	1. Institutions should provide clear information that "the average student can understand."
2. Receiving institutions should provide transfer students with a written explanation for each course that was not fully transferable.	2. Accountability regarding advice provided by counsellors and advisors could be enhanced by a "paper trail."
3. Mandatory advising sessions for all students intending to transfer should be implemented.	3. Mandatory advising was suggested as one way to clarify the transfer process for students.

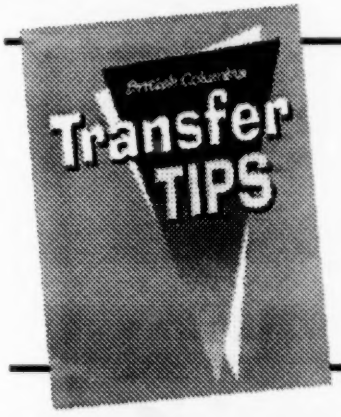
What Students Recommended

Student participants in *Phase I* and *Phase II* offered three similar recommendations to improve transfer policies and practices.

In addition, Phase I respondents recommended that: students should be informed that advising is available at both sending and receiving institutions; advisors should be responsible for ensuring that students receive accurate information; advisors' hours of operation should correspond to the needs of students; and through ongoing dialogue and examination of teaching and learning practices at each type of institution, community colleges and universities should continue to address the problem of declining grades after transfer. Other recommendations suggested by *Phase II* participants included: consistency of course numbering across all B.C. post-secondary institutions; more stability in course requirements from year to year; provision of information about transfer in high school; and the need for students to be informed about the entire system, not simply articulation between one community college and one university.

Conclusion

The findings summarized in this newsletter, together with other studies and reports available on the BCCAT web site, provide a considerable wealth of information on transfer issues in B.C. Lack of knowledge about or difficulty in gaining access to useful information remains a persistent theme across these studies. Although transfer provides access to degree completion for many students, transfer students are disadvantaged in that they are required to negotiate an additional hurdle in pursuit of their ultimate educational goals. Everyone involved in the transfer enterprise – including the BCCAT, sending and receiving institutions, secondary and post-secondary advisors and counsellors, post-secondary faculty, and Faculty of Education teacher education programs – needs to ensure that students can ***gain access to*** and ***understand*** the information they need. Distribution of the recently published *B.C. Transfer TIPS*[3] handbook to all potential transfer students is a positive step toward such a goal. Students, as active agents in their own lives, will probably always be responsible for their survival in the system. However, the post-secondary system, through its formal structures, policies and practices, can contribute significantly to student success through the system.



New from BCCAT:

British Columbia TRANSFER TIPS

Transfer Information for Post-Secondary Success

Available in print and electronic formats, Summer 1999

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- Electronic Mail: admin@bccat.bc.ca
- Telephone: 604-412-7700
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- BCCAT Online: www.bccat.bc.ca

3 BCCAT (1999). *B.C. Transfer TIPS. Transfer information for post-secondary success.* Vancouver: BCCAT.

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